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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PANAMA 000353

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#) [POL](#) [CHIEF](#)

SUBJECT: PANAMA POLITICAL ANALYST ON MAY 2 ELECTION:  
BARRING MISHAP, MARTIN TORRIJOS WILL WIN

REF: A. PANAMA 0040

[B](#). 03 PANAMA 3294

Classified By: DCM CHRISTOPHER MCMULLEN FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

#### SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) Former Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) political operative turned independent consultant and analyst, Jose Isabel Blandon, told DCM and POL Counselor that the PRD's superior numbers and organization and a divided opposition probably will secure the presidency for Martin Torrijos on May 2. Blandon predicted that many supporters of former president Guillermo Endara will fail to vote because they are disaffected from politics and because Endara's party, Solidaridad, lacks the electoral machine to get them to the polls. Also, candidate Jose Miguel Aleman, with support from the Arnulfistas and MOLIRENA, will get far more votes than his current 8% in opinion polls suggest. Besides an (improbable) misstep, Blandon said several things could derail Torrijos: further complications and bad publicity from the apparently corrupt activities of his cousin (and sidelined campaign chief) Hugo Torrijos, and internal party infighting. According to Blandon, anti-corruption, Endara's strongest issue, resonates more with the press than with voters. Blandon made no bones about his dislike for Endara, calling him "a danger to the country." End Summary.

#### Wary of Opinion Polls

[2](#). (SBU) Blandon, who served Panama dictator Manuel Noriega as publicist and New York Consul General (See Bio Note, para 9), now turned political consultant, recently discussed his view of the 2004 electoral campaign with DCM and POL Counselor. Blandon presented a concise analysis of Panama's electoral dynamics to support his view that PRD presidential candidate Martin Torrijos will win the May 2 vote. According to Blandon, Panama opinion polls have been notoriously inaccurate in past elections. (The latest poll shows Martin Torrijos leading ex-president Guillermo Endara 42%-34% with Arnulfista candidate Jose Miguel Aleman in third place with 8%.) One fault is that polls focus too heavily on urban areas but do not concentrate on likely rural voters, Blandon pointed out.

#### Party Loyalties Will Count

[3](#). (SBU) Blandon predicted that 1.4 million (70%) of Panama's roughly 2 million voters will actually cast ballots on May 2. Of those 1.4 million voters, around 1 million are registered party members. (See Reftel. Figures below were updated as of 12/31/2004.) Party affiliation is strong in Panama, Blandon said, and party members tend to vote for the entire party slate. That tendency is stronger in the countryside, where around 80% of the electorate will cast ballots. Among the parties, PRD has the biggest membership base (435,000), the most effective electoral machine, and the most disciplined voters. Endara's Solidaridad party has relatively few members (73,000), most of whom joined in the past several months, the weakest electoral machine, and least committed supporters. The Arnulfista-MOLIRENA-PLN coalition, Blandon continued, with over 300,000 members and over 2300 candidates for national and local office, will doubtless produce much more than 8% of the vote for Jose Miguel Aleman. Those facts will count heavily in the countryside, when election day comes. (Note: PLN is the National Liberal Party.)

#### "The Anti-System Vote Will Not Vote"

[4](#). (SBU) Blandon said the 1994 and 1999 elections have shown a fairly constant baseline for the three biggest parties.

The PRD can count on 32% of the vote; the Arnulfistas 21%; MOLIRENA 10%. Endara appeals above all to disaffected voters who take a cynical view of politics, Blandon continued. "The anti-system (Endara) vote will not vote," he said, certainly not in as large numbers as party members; in short, a large percentage of Endara supporters are not likely voters. Also Endara's support mostly is urban, where voter turnout is relatively low. Blandon predicted the following election day results:

Torrijos	37%
Aleman	32%
Endara	21%
Martinelli	4%
unaccounted	6%

#### Anti-corruption a Declining Issue

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15. (SBU) Another historical reality confronting the Endara campaign is that third-party candidates fall short in Panama. For instance, Alberto Vallarino, a highly placed Arnulfista who left the party to run for president in Panama's May 1999 election under another banner finished with only 17% of the vote. On the other hand, if Endara wins more than 25% of the vote, that could come at the expense of Aleman, Blandon said. The PRD has never captured more than 37% of the vote, he pointed out, and PRD ally Partido Popular is limited in what it can deliver for Torrijos. Anti-corruption, Endara's principal attraction for voters due to his clean record, in the end will have less effect on cynical voters than the press reports, Blandon predicted. Endara could get elected, Blandon conceded, if either Torrijos or Aleman make a major mistake.

#### Torrijos Also Has Problems

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16. (SBU) Predicting a tough campaign, Blandon hastened to add that victory for Torrijos is hardly assured. Trying to counteract the PRD's "lack of legitimacy with the private sector," Torrijos chose successful businessman Samuel Lewis Navarro as his first vice presidential running mate. Blandon pointed to several potential problems that could cost Torrijos the presidency. The first is the PRD's alliance with the Partido Popular (PP), the former Christian Democratic Party, which may not survive the election. Whether the alliance will help or hurt Torrijos is unclear. (Comment: Many observers point out that the PRD-PP alliance is inherently awkward because the Christian Democrats were fierce opponents of Manuel Noriega, whom the PRD supported.) Recently PP legislator Teresita de Arias publicized the abuse of tax "exonerations" by legislators who import luxury cars duty free, an action that angered many PRDistas who were the worst culprits.

#### Cousin Hugo Could Prove Toxic

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17. (C) But Torrijos faces still more potent internal dangers. The first is his close relationship with first cousin Hugo Torrijos, a major source of finance for his campaign, who apparently is implicated in a corruption scandal dating from his late-1990's stewardship of Ports Engineering Consulting Corporation (PECC). Martin has recently asked Hugo to step down as his campaign manager, Blandon noted, but can't really disentangle himself meaningfully from his involvement with Hugo. Another problem for Torrijos are the 7 or 8 anti-Torrijos legislative candidates running in large constituencies (circuitos), such as Arraijan, Chorrera, David, and San Miguelito, where intense in-fighting could cost Torrijos votes.

#### Endara Not Up To Challenge

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18. (C) Blandon emphasized that Panama has serious challenges ahead of it in the coming years. It must create a modern state structure, plan and finance Canal expansion, solve security issues on the Colombia border, and negotiate a Free Trade Agreement and "normalize" its relationship with the United States. Endara is not up to the challenge, Blandon implied. Calling him a "rudderless ship," Blandon claimed former president Endara is "a danger for the country," adding that Endara has no comprehension of how the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks have changed the world. (Note: On this score, Blandon gave credit to President Moscoso for establishing a close relationship with President Bush that is highly valuable for Panama. End Note.)

#### Bio Note and Comment

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19. (C) Bright, wily (a generous term for some observers), well connected and highly paid for years under Noriega, Bandon served as Noriega's Minister of Culture and in several diplomatic posts. An agronomist by training and an erstwhile leftist, Bandon leveraged his influence on his relationships with the Panama Defense Forces (PDF) and its leadership, making him one of the most powerful individuals in the government. In the late 1980s Bandon authored "Plan Bandon," an abortive attempt to ease Noriega from power and avoid bloodshed. Since Operation Just Cause and Noriega's fall from power in 1989, Bandon has reinvented himself, pursuing a career as a political analyst, commentator, and consultant for hire. (Bandon's clients include PRD First Vice Presidential Candidate Samuel Lewis Navarro, which accounts in part for his acerbic assessment of Endara, although the bad blood between them dates back to the late 1980s when Endara and Bandon were on different sides of the military/civilian divide.) He hosts a daily talk show on political affairs called Radio Noticias Bahia.

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